LETTERS.

RUBE TUBE

Philadelphia

"The Mean Machine?" by Robert Pattison [August 13/20] concludes that "The question 'What does television do to us?' has yet to be asked properly, much less answered intelligently. Which makes it one of the best questions around." Too bad that Pattison was unable either to formulate the question properly or address it intelligently. His careless and flippant rambling only adds to the confusion.

Pattison's essay is a tabloid version of the obfuscation that broadcast industry flacks and media apologists have been putting out for years. Ignoring elementary distinctions in media research, he mixes a sensational story of imitative mayhem, a *Glamour* magazine survey about aggression (not violence!), Senator Paul Simon's bill to exempt broadcasters from the threat of antitrust prosecution if they reduce TV violence and the massive 1982 report of the National Institute of Mental Health on "Television and Behavior." In Pattison's view all these things are somehow related to a "thriving industry" that "social scientists have built . . . around television violence" (in fact, few social scientists study TV violence anymore), and to some hidden agenda by social scientists and legislators to allege that commercial culture is not perfect and to take over control themselves.

Pattison's confusion of his fantasy of media research with its reality is evident when he seriously asks if there really is a difference between the effects of exposure to television (which is a mass ritual) and reading a book (which is a more selective activity) or even visiting a museum.

But most surprising is his inverted caricature of our work—the only work he cites by name (the wrong name, at that). Our Cultural Indicators project has been studying television content and the pervasive consequences of long-term exposure (not individual imitations) for nearly twenty years. We have developed and are continuing to test theories about the dynamics of television and its contribution to public thinking, behavior and policy. Pattison does not seem to be aware of the fact that our approach, findings and interpretations are very different from (and in fact challenge) the conventional assumptions about television violence that Pattison rightly (if incoherently) criticizes.

The "mean world syndrome" (not Pattison's "Mean World Index") is one of these hypotheses. It means that instead of acting out what they see on the tube, heavy viewers of violence-laden television tend to be a bit more insecure and mistrustful than otherwise demographically similar lighter viewers. Pattison both misstates the facts and misses the point when he writes that we "begin with the assumption that the medium makes the world a mean place and, not surprisingly . . . end with the conclusion that the world is a mean place because of television." We have concluded no such thing. We have reached our conclusion about the slightly but pervasively higher insecurity of the heavy viewer after wide exploration of response patterns to many questions derived from the potential "lessons" of long-term exposure to television. This revealed not that "the world is a mean place" but that the repetitive features of TV exposure do make systematic contributions to viewers' conceptions of social reality.

Our research demonstrates, among many other things, that television does cultivate common conceptions of life among otherwise diverse groups of viewers and that some of these common conceptions can strengthen a sense of insecurity, dependence and vulnerability, especially in women and minority groups. This is the essence of the "mean world syndrome" and not Pattison's feverish fantasy of some "mean machine." It means that television can and often does function as an instrument of social control. Confusing and deflecting systematic scrutiny of that central function of television can only serve to absolve of responsibility those who in fact control the medium for often narrow marketing purposes—about which Pattison has nothing but apologetics to offer.

George Gerbner
Larry Gross
Michael Morgan
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PATTISON REPLIES

Southampton, N.Y.

I argued that studies of television violence of the type on which the authors have built their reputations begin with bias, proceed by fallacy and end in paternalism. I thank George Gerbner and associates for writing to illustrate my contentions.

Bias: Readers will note how the authors blandly assume in a parenthesis that "exposure to television" is "a mass ritual." This initial bias begs the most fundamental questions about television. Is TV viewing really a corporate experience? Do we really respond to it by some mysterious act of collective unconsciousness? Since the authors' work begins by assuming this, all that remains for their research is the usual demographic legerdemain to support a predetermined conclusion.

Fallacy: The authors' letter reproduces their characteristic form of argument. Women and minorities, we learn, are the chief victims of TV's ritualistic violence, since they share "a sense of insecurity, dependence and vulnerability" and are "heavy viewers of violence-laden television." This is as good an example of the *post hoc/propter hoc* fallacy as modern pseudo-science affords. Nor can the authors evade the consequences of their bad logic by taking refuge in circumlocutions about TV violence "contributing to" or "cultivating" mean attitudes. These euphemisms either mean "causes" or they mean nothing. But it makes as much sense to argue that women and minorities watch "violence-laden" TV because they are insecure as to argue that they are insecure because they watch violence-laden television. It might make the best sense of all to argue that the insecurity, dependence and vulnerability of women and minorities reflect not a response to television but an accurate appraisal of their position in this society.

Paternalism: As I pointed out in my essay, the authors' biases and fallacies converge on a patronizing double standard of TV viewing. Those of us who are secure and independent need no monitor for our viewing habits, but vulnerable women and dependent minorities would benefit from the advice and consent of Gerbner & Co. in choosing their evening programs. If in pointing out this condescending conclusion I gave the impression that the authors possess the requisite cunning to have collaborated with legislators in the formulation of a hidden paternalistic agenda, I apologize. I only meant to show that they share with politicians a natural though no doubt unconscious ambition to substitute their judgment for that of the public about what constitutes good viewing.

The plaintiffs are aggrieved that I called their scholarly undertakings a "thriving industry." For twenty years they have packaged and repackaged a single fallacious theory about TV violence in scores of repetitious articles. If this is not industrial-strength scholarship, what is? I assume, then, that they are not contesting my word "industry," but my characterization "thriving." I'm sorry to hear business is bad. Perhaps in the welter of their scholarship the authors have forgotten that they did in fact create a Mean World Index, to which I accurately referred (see, for instance, the authors' collaborative effort, "Violence Profile No. 11," in the *Journal of Communication*, 1980, vol. 30, no. 3, where the Mean World Index is defined and deployed: "As a group, non-whites score higher on the Mean World Index," etc., etc.).

Readers will not have the opportunity to see that the authors' complaint reached *The Nation* on the letterhead of the Annenberg School of Communications, the institution founded by one-time media publisher Walter Annenberg, where two of the authors are currently employed. I leave it to a candid world whether those whose salaries are derived from the laundered proceeds of *TV Guide* are in a fit position to accuse others of pimping for the media.

More generally, Gerbner & Co. complain that my style does not meet their fastidious scholarly specifications. Readers of *The Nation* will judge for themselves if they have been the losers by my failure to write like a communications specialist. *Robert Pattison*